The past 20 years have seen a number attempts to involve prison officers in social work with prisoners. Drawing on the historical record and a small-scale evaluation of shared working in one prison, the article concludes that although is now public policy that social work in prisons should be shared between prison and probation officers, there are continuing problems of implementation. Options for policy are reviewed in the light of this research and in the context of the Woolf report.

SOCIAL WORK IN PRISON SINCE THE 1960s

There is nothing new in the idea that prison officers should be encouraged to develop relationships with prisoners which are more than purely custodial or disciplinary, although it is only since 1986 that this has been a matter of ‘public policy’ (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1989). Foren (1971) was able to cite the Report of the Prison Commissioners for 1962 in support of a positive answer to his question: ‘Is there a social work role for prison officers?’ He developed the point in a way which has become familiar over the past twenty years, during which, it will be argued, a paper consensus on the desirability of involving prison officers in social work tasks has failed to produce a comparable commitment on the ground:

... for most purposes it is the prison officer on the landing, the man who has most opportunity for continuous contact with the prisoner, who can, with help, be the most influential factor and the most able to assist the prisoner with his personal problems. It remains for us to find ways of helping that officer to undertake such a task - a task which, I am sure, he and his association would welcome if only because it would give him added status and a much more satisfying job (Foren, 1971, p.13).

‘His’ association - the Prison Officers’ Association (POA) - had made a similar case eight years before in a memorandum published in response to the report of the Advisory Council on the Treatment of Offenders on the organisation of after-care (ACTO, 1963). The report had recommended the appointment of specialist social workers who would be members of the prison staff but in other respects, such as pay and training, would be more like probation officers. The POA agreed that there should be more social workers in prisons, but argued that they should come from the ranks of prison officers. According to Thomas (1972), the POA was motivated by concern about the lack of a career structure for basic grade officers (a problem addressed by the Mountbatten Report 1966 and by the Fresh Start initiative 20 years later) and the trend, starting in the 1930s, for specialists to be appointed to prison jobs other than the ‘starkly custodial’ (Thomas, 1972, p.210). But Thomas also suggests that the POAs interest in increasing its members' involvement in welfare-oriented work was poorly understood or not accepted by those members: 'at the same time as they were protesting about the ill-effects of reformation, they were demanding that they be involved in it (p.206). Subsequent responses to attempts to develop a welfare or social work role for prison officers suggest that Thomas was right to identify a deep ambivalence among the POAs membership at the start of the process.
The ACTO report had stressed the need for specialist social workers to have close links with other prison staff, and the desirability of their being 'positively' assisted by prison officers; but, after discussion within the Home Office, it was decided that the social work task in prisons should be performed by (as they were then) probation and after-care officers. The first such officers were seconded to work in prisons in January 1966, the existing 'welfare officers' being incorporated into the probation service. The presence of this new group of deskilling and demoralising specialists has never been officially accepted by the POA. More surprisingly, it has never been fully accepted by probation officers either: their association, NAPO, has been committed since 1981 to a policy of withdrawal from prisons (NAPO, 1986; for a discussion of the implications see Stewart and Smith, 1987).

The continuing unease about a probation presence in prisons and what this does to prison officers' chances of relating to prisoners in a helping rather than disciplinary capacity can be traced through a number of articles (most of them, interestingly, by probation officers, in the spirit of Foren's view that 'we' must do something to help the prison officer) in the Prison Service Journal in the 1970s and 1980s. Their line is generally supportive of the greater involvement of prison officers in social work tasks. Some report on local initiatives in shared working (e.g. Fraser, 1975); some argue more ambitiously for a therapeutic conception of the prison as a whole (e.g. le Herissier, 1973); some comment on Home Office initiatives and research (e.g. Archer et al., 1976; Luff, 1984; Jepson and Elliot, 1986). There was early research support for 'shared treatment' (Shaw, 1974) in a report which suggested good results in terms of reconviction from 'extended contact' with probation officers in the six months before release, but did not draw the conclusion some probation officers might have hoped for:

Whatever conclusions are drawn from the study, one danger which must be avoided is the exclusive 'take-over' of social work in the prison by welfare departments [i.e. probation officers]. Many other staff are involved in social work ... The tentative findings of the present study ... indicate the potential of uniformed staff and instructors for developing their role - a fact which has long been recognised by the Prison Officers' Association. The welfare officer has no monopoly of good relationships with the inmates. The practical benefits to be gained from greater involvement of other staff in social work are clear, not least that it would relieve welfare officers of work which does not require their special expertise. This in turn would allow them more time to select cases in need of intensive treatment, and to support other staff in dealing with requests and applications (Shaw, 1974, p. 103).

If one substitutes the language of helping for that of treatment, this is essentially the argument that is still most widely used to support the involvement of prison officers in social work tasks. A report on another aspect of the same 'experiment', however, took a more cautious and perhaps prescient line. Having identified the same problem - that welfare officers were 'deflected from the task of rehabilitation' if they were swamped by practical problems arising from the fact of imprisonment - Holborn (1975) considered the provision of:

... other people to undertake the bulk of the practical work: auxiliaries could be employed, or uniformed prison staff could become
more involved. Neither idea is new ... However, there are problems in division of labour, and caseworkers in other settings have found it difficult to use auxiliary staff efficiently and have tended to resist delegation of work ... it may be that delegation of practical tasks to an auxiliary deprives the caseworker of openings for talking to clients about personal matters: and moreover, auxiliaries in other settings have expressed dissatisfaction with their role (Holborn, 1975, p. 125).

The findings of Shaw and Holborn had, according to Jepson and Elliot (1985), at least an indirect influence on the first substantial central government attempt to define the appropriate functions of prison and probation staff in providing a social work service in prisons. A study group with representatives from both prison and probation departments was set up in 1973, and its conclusions were published as a 'discussion document' in November of the following year (Home Office, 1974). This, to the distress of some, was sceptical about individual treatment, noting a move away from the medical analogy that persistent crime is a sickness susceptible to individual diagnosis, treatment and cure. The treatment task was redefined as one of 'developing an institutional environment' which would help appropriately motivated prisoners to understand and accept responsibility for themselves and their behaviour. 'An important part of the prison's task is social work with offenders using that phrase in its widest sense' (p.2), and this task was to be seen as being shared between prison and probation officers. Within this shared task it was to be recognised that 'the officer/inmate contact is the basic working relationship in the institution', and the probation officer/welfare officer was to be one of a number of specialists whose role should be seen, primarily as a consultant and adviser to prison staff.

If this was an attempt to please both sides, by accepting the POA's public stance in favour of a welfare role for prison officers while offering probation officers the grand status of consultant, it did not wholly succeed: the British Association of Social Workers, for example, was (reasonably) worried that this status might lead to the marginalisation of probation officers rather than their integration (BASW, 1975). Overall, however, the response was encouraging enough for the prison department to issue a circular instruction (CI 1/1977) announcing that there would be a 'period of experimentation', initially in five prisons, to encourage co-operation between prison and probation officers and fuller participation by the former 'in the field of inmate welfare'. The period of experimentation turned out to be a long one, lasting almost ten years, although during this time there was a considerable expansion of what came to be known as 'SWIP' (social work in prison) schemes(l). When Jepson and Elliot (1985) surveyed the field for the Home Office in mid-1984, they found 19 existing SWIP schemes in adult prisons; 13 prisons had had a scheme which had lapsed; 33 had never had a scheme. A further ten prisons had a 'related' scheme (one in which some effort was made to involve prison officers in welfare work, but short of fully shared working). There had been some local accounts of schemes, but no systematic evaluation.

It would be difficult, from the point of view of an advocate of shared working, to present this as an optimistic picture. There had, for example, been a fully developed shared working scheme in Pentonville prison since 1971, and elsewhere prison officers had been seconded full-time to welfare departments (one of Jepson and Elliot's
models of SWIP) well before the 1974 discussion document. By the early 1980s shared working was being actively supported by the prison and probation departments, more cautiously endorsed by the POA and NAPO (Jepson and Elliot, 1985, pp.172-4), and encouraged by the Prison Inspectorate, whose report for 1982 had 'no doubt that the involvement of prison officers in work of this kind' was 'a valuable development' (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1983). Yet fewer than half of the 65 adult prisons in England and Wales had any form of scheme in place at the time of the survey.

Despite or because of this evidence of problems of implementation, the prison department moved to establish shared working as public policy by Circular Instruction 25/1986, which formally announced its commitment to the concept and practice of shared working. It was explicit in saying that 'a shared working approach should be the norm', though equally explicit that prison managers should not expect any additional resources for its implementation. Shared working was seen as an appropriate model for all prisons, and the preferred model was that recommended by Jepson and Elliot (1985), the 'integrated wing team'. This, the Circular noted, was compatible with the attempt in the 'Fresh Start' initiative to find ways of enhancing the prison officer's role and potential job satisfaction; and it stressed that the planning of new establishments provided an opportunity to 'consider how the prisoner throughcare function should be discharged'.

This Circular, with Cl 40/1988, which deals with arrangements for shared working in young offender institutions (Y0Is), represents prison department policy on social work in prisons. It entails that prisoners should be allocated a 'personal officer' - a prison officer who should be their first point of contact if they want help or advice relating to their welfare - and that probation officers should be members of the wing (or similar unit) team, available to be consulted by and advise personal officers, and working directly with prisoners only if they present problems with which the personal officer cannot deal. Recent reports from the Inspectorate (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 1989; 1990) give some idea of how well the policy is working. In the report for 1988 the Inspectorate found, at most, 'good 'bottom-up' initiatives which were not part of an integrated plan' (p.35); in Y0Is they had 'not seen a good personal officer scheme in operation during this year(p.36). In the following year they were 'more heartened by the P4 Booklet on Personnel Officers (sic) than by the actual achievement of shared throughcare in (young offenders') establishments. In adult prisons they 'saw potential for, rather than the existence of, well-integrated systems of throughcare' (p.26), and criticised the probation service for lack of clarity on the division of labour between prison and probation staff.. they 'had the greatest difficulty in extracting such statements at even the top level from the probation service' (p.46). In spite of these shortcomings, the Inspectorate continued to support the development of shared working. In similar vein, the Woolf Report (Home Office, 1991) recommends an enhanced role for prison officers and a strengthening of the personal officer system for all prisoners serving more than 28 days. The policy announced by Cl 25/1986 remains intact.

SHARED WORKING AT GARTH

Garth is a Category U prison near Leyland, Lancashire, which received its first inmates in October 1988. By that time senior staff,
including the senior probation officer who was mainly responsible for devising Garth's version of shared working, had been in post for some months. There was thus time to plan the scheme carefully, presumably along the lines envisaged by the authors of Cl 25/1986 - although the Governor said that he had received no 'directive or suggestion' from above on how shared working might be organised. The senior probation officer obtained papers on shared working from a number of other prisons and other sources to help develop her ideas, and decided on the wing team model recommended by the Circular. Jepson and Elliot (1985) had identified four models: the attachment, either full or part-time, of prison officers to the probation department; the assignment of specific welfare tasks to individual prison officers not attached to the probation department; and the wing team model. Although they supported the last of these, they noted that such schemes had a high 'lapse rate': they identified as many lapsed schemes as current ones (eight of each), and suggested that this model might be vulnerable because of its diffusion of responsibility and its dependence on the support of wing managers. They were optimistic, however, about its chances of survival when it was introduced as part of a new regime in a new prison (pp.vii; 35).

The whole-hearted adoption of a wing team model at Garth is therefore not surprising, although it did surprise many of those who became involved. Prisoners were to be allocated a personal officer on arrival, who was to be the first point of contact for welfare problems. Each personal officer had a caseload of six. The wing-based probation officers were to act as consultants, trainers and advisers, and only to see prisoners individually if they were referred on by personal officers or by senior staff on the wing. They were to run groups for prisoners, preferably also involving prison officers, such as 'parole information groups' (the information for a high proportion of Garth prisoners was that they were not going to get parole under the then current restrictions). Carefully planned, and with a high level of commitment from relevant managers, the scheme met the criteria for optimism suggested by Jepson and Elliot. The senior probation officer and the Governor were both committed to its evaluation, and the writer was asked to carry out this work from July 1989. A short account of the research and its findings has been published elsewhere (Smith, 1991); the intention here is to summarise the main issues for policy.

Jepson and Elliot (1985) suggest four criteria by which SWIP schemes might be judged - prisoners' responses; prison officers' expertise and job satisfaction; probation officers' professionalism and job satisfaction; and relationships between prison and probation staff. These criteria relate closely to the aims of shared working as set out in the 1974 circular: to improve the service given to prisoners, increase the participation of prison officers in welfare work, free probation officers to concentrate on specialist tasks, and improve co-operation between the two services. Prisoners, prison staff and probation officers were therefore interviewed to obtain their views on the operation of the scheme. There turned out to be a fair measure of agreement among the three groups on its problems, within a broad (but not universal) consensus that the principle of the scheme was worthwhile.

The problems consistently identified as limiting the effectiveness of shared working were lack of time, lack of interest, lack of training, unavailability, and the contradiction between helping and disciplinary roles; with the possible exception of the last, problems
of implementation rather than of principle. For all three groups, but particularly for prisoners, the crucial issue was that of availability; the shift system at Garth meant that an officer might be routinely unavailable to prisoners for 23 days, an absence which could be prolonged by annual leave or sickness. The 'personal' element in the scheme inevitably became highly attenuated, as prisoners sought help from whoever was available. The same problem is noted by Woolf (Home Office, 1991) and, in young offender institutions, by Bottomley and Liebling (1987). In addition, SWIP was high on officers' informal 'task-dropping list, since by general consensus 'security has to come first'; tasks such as report-writing were therefore always liable to be postponed. It was difficult, in these circumstances, for anyone to feel that SWIP had a high priority.

Its lowly status in practice, whatever might be said at policy level, was also reflected in the lack of attention given to it in basic training. New officers were unanimous in saying that nothing in their training had prepared them for their role as personal officers. Report-writing in particular was a task in which many officers felt unskilled and vulnerable; lack of training was compounded by the difficulty of finding quiet space and time in which to write. Lack of time meant, too, that SWIP practice was largely demand-led, the main demand being for telephone calls. The majority line on this was that of least resistance: the calls were usually made, despite misgivings by some officers about the size of the telephone bill. Me experience of the Garth officers recalls Holborn's (1975) analysis of the 'welfare cycle' in which probation officers could become trapped, leaving them with no time for what she called 'reflective casework'. Personal officers at Garth ran the same risk; and those who are most disadvantaged are likely to be the already disadvantaged - prisoners who never ask for a telephone call because they have no one to call.

While a minority of prison officers were fundamentally opposed to the SWIP scheme, feeling an inherent contradiction between its expectations of them and their disciplinary and custodial roles, most (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) accepted it and were interested in possible improvements to its operation. The pattern among prisoners was similar, and probation officers were unanimous in supporting the scheme in principle, while finding difficulties in practice in managing the role it entailed for them. (In particular, they found it hard to say 'No' to requests which should properly have been made to personal officers.) Nobody from any of the groups took seriously the possibility that probation officers might withdraw from work in prisons. But there was broad agreement on the kind of changes which were needed to improve the scheme. These included a tightening of induction procedures, to ensure that every prisoner met his personal officer soon after arrival at Garth; a firm policy that reports should only be written after an interview for the purpose; more rigorous recording in the wing file of contacts with prisoners; a pairing arrangement to cover for a personal officer's absence; and, perhaps most important, some system by which SWIP activity could be formally recognised and valued, for example by better feedback on the use made of reports. SWIP entails, for many officers, unfamiliar anxieties and tensions, and it should be recognised that they may need (and do deserve) support in managing these (for example, reassurance that they would be backed up even if their assessment in a report was not as a prisoner would have wished, as long as it was honestly made on the basis of first hand evidence). Improvements in training, too, would be a positive expression of management.
commitment.

Shared working is supposed to improve the working relationship between the services, and the model adopted at Garth seemed to have at least the potential to achieve this. Although personal officers spoke of 'their' probation officer with varying degrees of warmth - with the traditional argument that 'he's never here' (especially when needed) making an appearance - most interviews conveyed a sense of a valued relationship. The sheer amount of contact they had with the wing-based probation officers was a factor in this; and whenever an officer mentioned having spent a week in a probation office outside prison it was always in positive terms. According to the Prison Inspectorate (HM Inspector of Prisons, 1990) this practice 'now seems rare' (p.27) and may not be the most efficient means of introducing prison staff to the full range of probation work; but in the absence of other means, its apparent rarity may be a matter for regret.

Jepson and Elliot (1985) suggested that while shared working seemed to improve co-operation and understanding between the services 'below the surface lie problems and tensions that remain unresolved, or only partially resolved'(p.70). But this seems inevitable: the services have different aims, priorities, professional ideologies, and so on; it would be odd, and worrying, if they always agreed on everything. It is now widely recognised, in the context of strong official encouragement of inter-agency co-operation in criminal justice (echoed in the Woolf Report's first recommendation) that useful co-ordination of effort is compatible with differences between agencies and therefore with the possibility of conflict. As the staff interviewed at Garth were fully aware, the inherent differences between agencies make co-operation harder than it sounds in official statements (Blagg et al., 1988), but not therefore impossible.

CONCLUSIONS: THE SHAPE OF HAPPINESS

The context of social work in prisons is changing. Implementation of the parole reforms in the Criminal Justice Act 1991 should help to reduce the volume of reports required in short-and medium-term establishments, thus making the workload more manageable, and reports in long-term prisons more meaningful. At the same time, the Act's requirement of compulsory supervision after release for all but the shortest term prisoners will require more intensive communication between prison and probation staff outside the prison than has been usual, if the idea of 'sentence planning' is to have any meaning.

As this paper has shown, the idea that prison officers should play a part in social work in prison has a long history. It is not a history of steady progress. Rather, the same problems are identified again and again: the continuing relevance of the 20 year-old research of Shaw (1974) and Holborn (1975) is striking, and any reader of the relevant articles in the Prison Service Journal will quickly be affected by a powerful sense of deja vu. The persistence of these problems - relating to availability, training, consistency, commitment, the tension between discipline and helping, the low priority accorded to welfare work -suggests that they arise from features which are common to all (or nearly all) prison regimes, perhaps at all times, and are not peculiar to Garth in late 1989. In the face of this possibility, there appear to be three main policy options.

The first is to give up the idea of shared working as a bad job. This
is in fact the option taken in many prisons, though not in official statements: shared working has either never been tried, or was tried and 'lapsed'. Probation officers continue to do all the 'welfare' work; prison officers, confined to a 'starkly custodial' role, are encouraged in the view said by a personal officer at Garth to characterise officers from local prisons, that happiness is door-shaped. It is most unlikely that this option will ever become public policy, especially after the Woolf Report; but it is equally unlikely that it will cease to be the preferred or default option in many prisons, unless there are major changes (not recommended by Woolf) in the pattern of recruitment and training of prison officers.

The second option is to persevere along existing lines, as broadly recommended in successive reports from the Prison Inspectorate. It is plausible that the limitations and problems of shared working schemes could be reduced by a clearer management commitment from both prison and probation services to making them work. The existing variations between prisons suggest that a local commitment of this kind, from the relevant prison manager and the senior probation officer, can make an important difference. For all its problems, the scheme at Garth was seen by a majority of all groups interviewed as worthwhile in principle, at least a potential improvement on what they had known elsewhere. An effective high level management commitment to shared working would be reflected at the level of implementation in serious attention to administrative problems (time, consistency and accessibility); in a higher priority for SWIP in the list of essential tasks; in the provision of relevant basic and in-service training, so that new recruits are clear that SWIP is part of what being a prison officer entails; and in institutionalised reward and support systems for personal officers. Success in pursuing this option is likely to depend on resource questions - specifically, on a substantial and sustained reduction in the prison population - as well as on a clearer commitment to shared working at all levels of the prison service (and perhaps, although their official stance is more clearly supportive, in probation services too).

The third option represents a more radical attempt to ensure that prison officers play a part in welfare work. This is the model developed by the Throughcare Regimes' project jointly established by the northern region of the prison department and the South Yorkshire Probation Service, which ended in June 1990. There is space here to describe it only briefly. Basing his ideas on his experience as senior probation officer at Lindholme prison, the project worker, Tony Grapes, argued that, in the light of the experiences of shared working described above, the right starting point was to imagine how a prison regime would discharge its 'throughcare' obligations if the seconded probation presence were removed. These obligations are to be identified through an analysis of prisoners' throughcare needs (to break with the demanded 'welfare cycle'). All aspects of the regime - work, education, the chaplaincy, specialist groups (often run by agencies outside the prison) - are seen as contributing to throughcare, and prisoners' choice between and access to these services should be maximised. The basic 'throughcare partnership' is between prison officers (personal officers in long-term prisons, backed by a duty officer system) and probation officers in the field. Only after this conceptual model has been established should the role of seconded probation officers be considered (Grapes, 1990).

What will they do? For a start, they will not carry a caseload, since they would then begin to take over from prison officers in the
throughcare partnership. In line with experience at Garth, Grapes is clear that if they are given the chance probation officers will quickly find duties for themselves that are familiar and comfortable. They will make telephone calls, counsel prisoners, write reports and so on. So they must not be given the chance: in practice, this means that they should not be based on wings; their direct contact with prisoners must be reduced. The seconded probation officers should be viewed as a resource by which the regime can be enhanced; their statutory duties should be minimal. As examples of the kind of work they might do Grapes cites, inter alia, research on needs, contributions to induction programmes and information systems for prisoners, training and consultancy, help with problem focused groups, brokerage between the prison and community-based agencies, and contributions to throughcare management.

The model is attractive as a radical break with the long history of mainly unsatisfactory and arguably half-hearted efforts to develop shared working. In its emphases on 'normalisation' through access for prisoners to services available in the local community, and on prisoners' rights to exercise informed choices about which aspects of the throughcare regime they wish to use, it seems compatible with Woolf's advocacy of community prisons and of 'compacts' or 'contracts' between prisoners and prison managements. In deliberately marginalising the seconded probation presence, however, it may entail the risk of removing it altogether. Certainly it is not clear why a prison manager would want, or feel inclined to pay for, a probation team of the customary size if all its statutory obligations to individual prisoners were being discharged by prison staff. There are others who can provide research, training and advice. Stewart and Smith (1987) suggested that experience in young offenders' establishments was not encouraging as an indication of the social work service prisoners could expect if probation officers ceased to work with individual cases; the Garth experience suggests caution at least; and the reports of the Prison Inspectorate inspire no more optimism. This option, then, while promising an end to the tinkering approach to shared working of the past twenty years, carries its own risks. The consequences of failure would be borne by prisoners.

Note

1. Sometimes, confusingly, the acronym SWIP is used to mean 'Shared Working in Prisons'; and in CI 40/1988, on young offender throughcare, 'shared working' means liaison between prison officers and probation officers outside the institution. The shifting terminology may reflect a lack of clarity about what is meant.

Acknowledgements

In preparing this article I have been helped by many people - prisoners, prison staff and probation officers - but particularly by Mary Whyham, Assistant Chief Probation Officer, Lancashire, and Tony Grapes, Senior Probation Officer, South Yorkshire.

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prisoner’, Prison Service Journal, 24, pp.2-5.


